

## *The Hill of Regret*

John 13:1-17

Maundy Thursday 2024

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I'm reading a book called *The Power of Regret*. I'm finding it engaging and, at times, quite challenging. Turns out there are lots of people out there who like to claim, "I have no regrets," but that usually proves to be more wishful thinking than anything. A 71-year-old admitted: "When I was a child, my mother would send me to a small local store to buy a few grocery items. I frequently would steal a candy bar when the grocer wasn't looking. That's bothered me for about sixty years."

No, we don't have to look far to find examples of regret. We hear two in tonight's gospel reading, and considering the time and the place for Jesus and his disciples, these stories are a lot more serious than stolen candy bars. Jesus and his disciples have sat down for the Passover meal in the Upper Room. An ill wind is blowing. Judas has made plans to betray his master for a paltry thirty pieces of silver. A while later, proud Peter stubbornly refuses to let Jesus wash his feet. It makes me wonder: what else will go wrong for Jesus and his band of feeble followers before the night is over?

When I was in high school, I was working for an area farmer. I was new to the job. I didn't know much about tractors. I didn't know that the power take-off on the tractor runs the auger. If you let out the clutch, the power take-off turns on. And if you push in the clutch, the power take-off shuts off. Out—on. In—off.

After we had unloaded some corn, the auger got jammed. The farmer went up on the roof of the bin to work on it. He told me to push in the clutch. The auger stopped. He worked on it for about five minutes. Then...he dropped his pliers. The pliers slid down the roof and onto the ground. Instinctively I reacted like a new employee—I tried to be helpful. I jumped off the tractor and went to retrieve the pliers. There was only one problem. When I got off the tractor, my foot let out the clutch, and the power take-off engaged.

There's no easy way to say this, but my boss' fingers went through the pulley at the end of the auger. They were badly mangled. He needed to go the emergency room as soon as possible. Fortunately, I did not have to drive him. I was too shook up to do it. So I stayed on the farm and looked after the children while his wife rushed him to the hospital.

It seemed like forever before they returned. I replayed the horrible scene over and over in my mind. Why did I jump off the tractor? Why wasn't I more careful? Why did I think I could work on a farm anyway? In the middle of all my *whys*, I was overcome with regret.

Finally, the farmer and his wife came home. They had some good news and some bad news. The good news: he didn't lose his fingers. The doctor had been able to stitch them back together again. The bad news: his hand was going to take a long time to heal, and his fingers would never be quite the same. In fact, on cold winter days, my boss would feel those fingers and think of me. For the rest of his life.

Friends, do you have any regrets? I'm guessing you do. Who hasn't said or done something you wish you could take back? A careless mistake, an angry email, a slip of the tongue, a DUI, a quick glance at another student's paper. We've all done things we regret.

Judas has regrets too. Only his are more public. Judas makes a deal with the religious leaders, the Sanhedrin. He's going to reveal the whereabouts of his master. Who knows why he does it. Does he want the money? Is he seeking attention? Is he trying to force Jesus' hand? And why does he have to identify Jesus with a kiss? He could simply call him by name or point to him. But no, he puts his lips to Jesus' cheek and kisses him. For whatever reason Judas acts as he does, the end result is the same—regret.

So what do you do with regret? Make excuses? Tell your boss he didn't give you good enough directions? Tell your parents you lost track of the time? Tell your spouse you really didn't mean it? Tell the religious leaders it wasn't about the money? What do you do?

Perhaps the hardest thing with regret is finding a remedy that will actually work. Thomas Gilovich is a professor of psychology at Cornell University. Gilovich was doing research on people. He noticed that certain things—a casual remark, a glimpse of a face, a thorny question—would often cause participants to look distracted. Suddenly they'd be staring off into space. "What are you looking at?" Gilovich would ask. One man replied, "Lost life."

Gilovich came to refer to this phenomenon as a "window of regret." What the window revealed were lost opportunities, lost relationships, lost lives that persons could have lived if only they had done a few things differently.

Gilovich went on to conclude that regrets can serve a good purpose. They can be a form of creative thought, motivating people to improve their lives. If people regret “well,” says Gilovich, they can map a path to a better future. But if they don’t regret well—and too often that’s the case—they can get stuck in the past. You know what I mean...a middle-aged dad who wishes he had spent more time with his kids when they were growing up, an unemployed twenty-something who wishes she had applied herself more in school, a woman who wishes she hadn’t started flirting with a co-worker.

At the heart of regret, I think, is this: we can’t seem to find the forgiveness we’re looking for. I mean, imagine if Judas tried to go before the Sanhedrin and plead for forgiveness—forgiveness for being a second-rate disciple and a self-serving friend. Would it have done any good? Probably not. The high priest couldn’t do anything about it now. Oh, maybe he could have given Judas a few days in jail to appease his guilt, but he could not forgive him. It was not his to grant. Maybe that’s why so many of us spend so much time in regret. We don’t *feel* forgiven. Specifically, we can’t seem to find a way to forgive ourselves.

In the Gospel of Matthew, toward the end of Judas’ story, he has a change of heart. He knows he’s betrayed an innocent man. He returns to the religious leaders and tries to give the money back. But they wouldn’t take it. So Judas throws down the coins in the temple and storms out.

What happens next is truly sad. Judas leaves the temple and is walking alone, trudging up a very steep hill. You could call it the *hill of regret*. The path is marked by pain and hurt. On his shoulders he bears a heavy burden—the weight of his own failure. The further he walks, the more weighed down he becomes.

Friend, we know this hill, don’t we? Haven’t we been on it? Haven’t we climbed with weary, wounded hearts wrestling with our own regrets? Haven’t we carried with us sighs of anxiety and words of excuse. For some of us the pain is on the surface. For others it’s buried deep inside. But for all of us there remains a nagging question—can I ever be forgiven?

At the trail’s end for Judas there are two trees. One is weathered and lifeless. Wind and rain have worn the branches smooth. It is dead but still sturdy, sturdy enough to support a man’s weight. It is here—at the end of a rope—that Judas chooses to deal with his failure.

It's heartbreaking, really. If only Judas had looked to the tree just behind his own. That tree is also dead; its wood is also smooth. But there's a much different reason for it. Someone has taken a rope and tied a crossbeam to the main trunk. Even though it is intended to be an instrument of death, its real purpose is to be a channel of life. You see, precisely here—according to God's great plan—is the end of regret and the beginning of hope.

What a pair of trees. Only a few feet from the tree of despair stands the tree of hope. Life so paradoxically close to death. Light within an arm's reach of darkness. Sorrow just a few days away from joy. Which will it be—despair or hope?

My friends, most of us have not sunk as low as Judas, but we understand him...all too well. We've been on the hill of regret. We know how steep it is. Whether mangling a boss' fingers or wounding a loved one's self-esteem or simply disappointing ourselves, we have trudged up the hill with a heavy burden on our backs. We have wondered: can I ever be forgiven?

As we near the crest of the hill, we see a tree. Our hearts stop. There is someone on it—a man. There's a look of sorrow and love in his eyes. He waits for us with outstretched, nail-pierced hands. And he says, "Come. I forgive you. I will help you forgive yourself. Regret no more." Amen.